



File Code: 1950

Date: March 1, 2016

Dear Interested Party:

The Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest (MBS) is beginning the environmental analysis for the South Fork Stillaguamish Vegetation Project. This project proposes a landscape scale thinning of second-growth stands within the S.F. of the Stillaguamish River drainage, including Canyon Creek. You are invited to review the proposed project and provide comment on what issues the analysis should address.

Project Location

This vegetation management project is located on the Darrington Ranger District, east of Granite Falls in Snohomish County, Washington. The legal description of the Project area includes sections in: Township 29 North (T29N), Range 9 East (R9E), Range 10 East (R10E), and Range 11 East (R11E), Township 30 North (T29N), Range 8 East (R8E), Range 9 East (R9E), Range 10 East (R10E), and Range 11 East (R11E), and in Township 31 North (T31N), Range 8 East (R8E). Please see the attached Project map for more information.

Proposed Action

The project would thin second-growth timber stands within the S.F. Stillaguamish River drainage to promote forest stand structure that would serve as habitat for old-growth associated species and maintain and enhance Riparian Reserve conditions.

Second growth stands on National Forest System lands across the whole S.F. Stillaguamish River drainage (outside of wilderness) were reviewed for the opportunity to improve habitat conditions where high stocking densities limit stand structure development for spotted owl and marbled murrelet nesting. Historic owl and murrelet locations provided insights on forest plant association and stand structure associated with occupied sites. Connectivity or lack of connectivity between suitable nesting habitats was also considered when identifying stands for treatment. For marbled murrelet habitat, stands 20 to 50 miles from saltwater were reviewed, with closer proximity to saltwater considered a potential beneficial factor for breeding murrelets having successful recruitment of young. Stands were also reviewed for the presence of mistletoe, an important habitat component which could be encouraged with additional light from thinning for future murrelet nest branches. Riparian Reserves were reviewed for habitat conditions described as desired in Aquatic Conservation Strategy Objectives.

Approximately 25% of the 65,225 acre project area is composed of second growth stands (9,000 acres of 45-80 year old stands and 7,500 acres of 20-44 year old stands). Only a portion of the second growth stands would be treated and final treatment acres would be adjusted with additional field reconnaissance and analysis. The remaining 75% of the project area is composed of natural stands and other habitat types where no thinning would occur.

The following restoration treatments are proposed:

- Commercially thin approximately 3,000 acres of 45 to 80 year old stands (30% of stands in this age class in the project area; <5% of the total project area)

- Final treatment acreages would depend on access (storm damage and cost of road reconstruction), density of streams and Riparian Reserves which influence treatment operations, and presence of stand conditions already approaching desired condition.
- Non-commercially thin up to 3,750 acres of 20 to 44 year old stands (30 to 50% of stands in this age class in the project area; <5% of the total project area)
 - Final non-commercial treatment acreages would depend on the funds generated by the project, allocations for Forest stand treatments, and access
- Riparian Reserve thinning (both commercial and non-commercial) would occur outside of the inner stream gorge, within stands chosen for thinning to adjust stocking density.

The Proposed Action consists of vegetation management in Forest Plan allocation areas of Late Successional Reserves (LSRs) and Riparian Reserves. The Proposed Action, designed to meet the MBS Forest Plan as amended, includes non-commercial and commercial timber harvest and connected actions of: road reconstruction, rock pit utilization, temporary road and landing construction, helicopter landing and staging area construction, invasive weed treatment, trailhead enhancements, treatment of activity-generated fuels along roads and at landings, and road storage and decommissioning.

Preliminary Issues

The Forest Service identified three preliminary issues raised by the Proposed Action that could generate alternatives or guide analysis of environmental effects.

Issue 1: Impacts to LSR and Critical Habitat

The road work and thinning may affect LSR and old growth associated species and primary constituent elements of critical habitat for marbled murrelets and spotted owls.

Issue 2: Impacts to Watershed Processes and Fisheries: Water Quality and Sediment Yield

The road work and thinning may affect water quality, and temperature in the project area and downstream fish habitat.

Issue 3: Economic Viability

The economics of the S.F. Stillaguamish Project may influence the implementation of the project.

Request for Comments

To ensure that the full range of issues is considered and all major issues addressed, scoping comments on the Proposed Action are invited from interested parties. Comments will be most useful if received by April 4, 2016. Comments received in response to this letter, including names and addresses of those who comment, will become part of the Project Record and available for public review.

Emailed comments are preferred, and should be sent to comments-pacificnorthwest-mtbaker-snoqualmie-darrington@fs.fed.us. Written comments should be sent to: District Ranger,

Attention: S.F. Stillaguamish Vegetation Project, Darrington Ranger District, 1405 Emens Ave. North, Darrington, WA 98241. Office hours for submitting oral, telephone, or hand delivered comments are 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Comments may also be faxed to (360) 436-1309. Hand-delivered comments can be taken to the Darrington Office of the Forest Service. For further information, contact ID Team leader Phyllis Reed at (360) 436-2332, or plreed@fs.fed.us.

I will be the Responsible Official for this project. After the scoping period, the Forest Service plans to prepare and release a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) to document the environmental analysis. The EA will have a 30-day public review and comment period. After government-to-government consultation, and addressing any comments on the draft EA, I expect to issue a draft Decision Notice (DN) and finding of no significant impact (FONSI), documenting my decision and rationale.

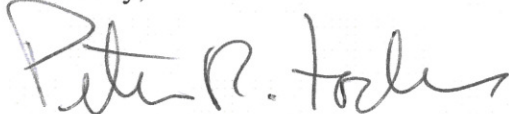
The draft decision for this project will be subject to the pre-decisional objection process for projects and activities implementing land management plans (36 CFR 218). Under this process, members of the public who have participated in the public comment process (during any public participation process throughout project planning), will have the opportunity to have unresolved concerns receive independent review by the Forest Service prior to a final decision being made by the responsible official.

Only individuals or entities (as defined by 36 CFR 218.2) who have submitted timely, specific written comments (as defined by 36 CFR 218.2) regarding this proposed project or activity during this or another public comment period established by the responsible official will be eligible to file an objection. Opportunity for public comment on an Environmental Assessment includes during scoping, the 30 day public review period, or any other instance where the responsible official seeks written comments. Written comments are those submitted to the responsible official or designee during a designated opportunity for public participation provided for a proposed project. Specific written comments should be within the scope of the proposed action, have a direct relationship to the proposed action, and must include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider

The EA and my decision will be posted on the Forest web at www.fs.usda.gov/goto/mbs/projects and also mailed to those who comment on the project.

I appreciate your interest in this project and in the management of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

Sincerely,



PETER FORBES
Darrington District Ranger

Enclosures: Project map